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TIME UNTIED: E-MAIL GROWS UP

Written by: Steve Prentice

PermitMail

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Imagine waking up one morning to find 15 people sitting around your kitchen table, each eager to sell you products of dubious quality, none of which you really want. You shoo them away politely. As you get into your car, there they are, in fact there's more of them, all squeezed into the front and back seats, your polite "no thanks" simply having registered with them as a symbol of your "pushover potential," enough so that they told their colleagues to join in. In your office, there are twenty more, sitting on your desk, in your chair, pushing your files aside, and using your phone while they wait. And imagine this happens day after day after day. Not a pretty sight. Not a good use of your time.

Yet this scenario plays out in your e-mail in-box every day. You don't have to have visited any particular websites or to have signed up for any particular memberships to have this happen to you. Experiments have been performed in which a brand new e-mail address and domain was registered, but not used, and the first junk e-mail arrived within twenty minutes.

Depending on who you talk to, unsolicited e-mail or Spam comprises 40-60% of the volume of e-mail on the Internet. For spammers it makes economic sense. One tenth of one percent return on 10 million e-mails is 10 thousand. That's good money for a publicity medium that costs virtually nothing to run.

But for us, it's bad news. The time it takes to simply delete junk e-mail is time and money lost. Invisible time, since the action of clicking a mouse seems negligible. But let's look at it from a higher perspective. Last month, my e-mail inbox received 2,530 e-mail messages, of which 469 were "real communications" with clients and colleagues, the remaining 81% being junk. If you were to allow a conservative assessment that you could identify and delete each unwanted message within 4.5 seconds, the remaining 81%, 2,061 e-mails would have taken two-and-a-half hours of continuous clicking to eliminate. (Your monthly e-mail volume might be more or less than mine, but I'm confident that your ratio of Spam to legitimate mail is still more than you'd wish.)

What could you do with two-and-a-half extra hours in a workweek? Lots of things come to mind, but when people say to me, "I wish there was a way I could just freeze time for an afternoon - just so I could get caught up," they are seldom aware that this opportunity is right before their eyes.

The time has come, therefore, to put a lock on your e-mail, the same way you do with your house and your car; to recognize that the pendulum of e-mail has swung from being an instant messenger service to a swallower of time, yet another derailing force. How do you do this? Well, regular Spam filtering services that seek out keywords and addresses are quickly circumvented by opportunistic Spammers, so they are not the answer. For example if the word "Viagra" is on the banned list, then they'll use v1agra (note the numeral 1 in place of the "i"), or v*i*a*g*r*a, or any of thousands of other permutations. Spam filters just can't keep up with such deviousness. You know that. You've seen the results in your in-box already.

The answer is found in whitelist technology. These are filters in which you create and maintain your own list of acceptable e-mail addresses and domains. Every incoming piece of mail is checked against this list, and those that aren't accepted are held for a period of a few days and then deleted. Therefore, only legitimate mail gets through.

"But wait a minute," you say, "what about legitimate people who aren't yet on my list, such as new potential clients, won't they get rejected also?" Certainly not. A technology that threatened to throw the baby out with the bathwater wouldn't last very long. Instead, all e-mails from senders who are not on your whitelist will receive a letter back instructing them to send a request, a one-click effort on their part, similar to ringing a doorbell. You have the option to then accept this writer, and the mail gets through.

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"But wait a minute," you say again, "wouldn't legitimate people being treated in this way feel slighted or offended?" Offended? Because you take steps to defend your time so that you can do your work more efficiently? I think most clients or colleagues would be happy to know that you have found a solution that allows you to focus on their needs more thoroughly.

"But hold on," you say next, "I don't think I have the time to keep adding names to a whitelist. My address book has hundreds of names already. Each time a new person writes to me I have to enter his address as well?" Again the answer is good news: a good whitelist service will start by importing your current address book, thus saving the time of re-entering the names. It will then make the task of adding new people a one-click process, done at the same time as you grant them permission.

I made a point of testing this service for two months before deciding to write about it, to put these concepts to the test. The bottom line is that the time needed to maintain a whitelist is fractional - minute - compared to the time required to eliminate junk from your in-box daily.

And here's the best part of all, and the part that took me a little by surprise, and that's to do with concentration. It's a proven fact that every disruption to your concentration costs in terms of productivity and mental acuity for many minutes after the interruption itself has ceased. But I found the combined decrease in the amount of incoming mail, together with the knowledge that every piece of incoming mail was immediately related to my business allowed me to keep on a higher plane of concentration - more than I had expected. There was no need to step out of my productive momentum to swat another bug. I was (and still am) able to maintain a much greater level of focus and productivity thanks to my faithful e-mail doorkeeper. And that's what working in Cool-Time is about.

If you're interested in winning back some more of your time, concentration and control, I urge you to contact your system administrator or Internet provider and ask about establishing a whitelist system. The benefits are tangible. The productivity is measurable. The enjoyment is real, and the time has come.

Steve Prentice is an author and speaker who teaches "Professional Survival Skills" such as Time Management, Business Writing and Conflict Management. His book, Cool-Time and the Two-Pound Bucket is available at Chapters, and on-line at www.cool-time.com . He always invites comments, arguments and success stories, and can be reached at prentice@bristall.com.